Mindfulness of the Body in the Body

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on Dec 12, 1999 in Plum Village, France.

Today is the second of December 1999, and we are in the New Hamlet for our Dharma talk. We are in our winter retreat. We have been speaking about the five skandhas, the five elements that make up our own person, and that is exactly the object of our meditation. To meditate means to be aware of what is going on in the domain of the five skandhas, and the Buddha gave us very specific recommendations how to recognize these elements, to look deeply into their nature, to understand deeply the nature of these elements, and that understanding will lead to our liberation, to our freedom.

We know that the first aggregate, the first element, is called form. Form here means our body. We care very much about our form, but do we really care about our form? We buy a lot -- fruit, medicine, cosmetics, and so on, for the sake of our form, but do we really care for it? Do we know exactly what our form is? Do we understand it? Do we know how to take good care of it? If we don't, then we have to learn from the Buddha, our teacher. And the Buddha advises us, first of all, to go back to our form, to our body, and make peace with it, because we may be at war with our body. We may have mistreated our body, we may have made our body suffer a lot, and between us and our body there may be a lot of conflict. Going back to your body and embracing it and reconciling with it, that is the first act of meditation.

There are four domains of meditation, in fact the object of meditation is of four kinds. The first is our body, the second is our feelings, the third is our mind, and the fourth is the object of our mind. Mind here means consciousness. We don't know enough about our body, we don't know enough about our feelings, we don't know enough about our mind, and we don't know enough about the objects of our mind. Therefore, to meditate means to go back to these four realms and try to understand and to take care. These four objects of our meditation are sometimes called the foundations of mindfulness. According to this teaching, our breath is part of our body. That is why going back to our breath is already going back to our body. All Buddhist manuals of meditation practice begin with going back to our breath, because if you know how to go back to your breath, you go back to your body very easily, and then you go back to your feelings and your mind, and then you go back to the objects of your mind. Objects of your mind means objects of perception. This morning we learned about the foundation, the base, the object of our perception. So, our breath is included in our body and that is why as a practitioner we should be able to go back to our breathing in order to go back entirely to our body. Our breath can be considered to be a wonderful vehicle bringing us back to our body and our feelings, our mind, etc. We don't need a lot of time in order to go back to our body and our feelings, if we know how to use that wonderful vehicle called breathing, and this is called mindful breathing. Because breathing is something you do every day, but most of us do not breathe mindfully, and therefore we cannot go back to our body and our feelings. Our practice is to learn how to breathe mindfully and if you breathe mindfully you are back already to your breath, namely to part of your body. If you continue to practice mindful breathing, then you will go back entirely to your body. Go back to our body, reconcile with it, get to know what is going on in our body. The wrong that we have done to our body, the conflicts we are having with our body, and we will know what to do and what not to do in order to be on good terms with our body.

So the Anapanasatti Sutta, the Discourse on Mindful Breathing is something that every meditator has to learn, has to study. The day I discovered the Discourse on Mindful Breathing I felt as if I was the happiest person on earth, really a heritage. Suppose you go

around and you discover a field where a lot of treasure is buried in it. You know that you have become a very rich person. You will be able to buy anything. That was my feeling when I discovered the Sutra on Mindful Breathing. I had the feeling that I had discovered a treasure and it made me very happy. That is why I have nourished the idea to translate it and to give commentaries to it, and to make suggestions as to how to make use of the Sutra on Mindful Breathing. Now that book is available, a translation of the Discourse on Mindful Breathing from both Pali and Chinese, with commentaries and with suggestions as to how to apply mindful breathing into our daily life. If you are a serious practitioner you should learn about the techniques, the art of mindful breathing. It is very important. As soon as you embrace the practice you can feel better right away. It's good to be home to yourself and your breath is already your home, the door of your home. Closing the door, going into the home, you know that you are already home.

If you continue with the practice of mindful breathing, you will go back not only to your body, but you will go back to your feelings. All the mental formations that manifest in yourself including fear, desire, love, despair, hope, you will go back to them. You will recognize them, you will embrace them, you will begin to look deeply into their nature, and you will get the right kind of understanding that will set you free.

Last year we offered a twenty-one day retreat in North America on the practice of mindful breathing. Twenty-one days, and we only learned about mindful breathing and we did use the Discourse on Mindful Breathing during our retreat. We hope that the Dharma talks given during that retreat, also the session for questions and answers will be made into a book so that people who did not have a chance to attend the retreat, could get a taste of the retreat by reading the book.

Inquire about the art of mindful breathing from your brother, from your sister in the Dharma. Enjoy the practice of mindful breathing, it is very rewarding. I assure you that when you begin to practice it, you will feel better right away.

Breathing in , I know that I am breathing in,
Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.
Breathing in, I feel alive,
Breathing out, I smile.

It is wonderful. You can change your life right away.

We know that the practice in Plum Village is to always try to go back to the present moment, to the here and the now. Because we know that only in the here and the now can we touch life deeply, and learning how to live deeply each moment of our daily life is our true practice. Therefore, mindful breathing can always bring us back to the here and the now. If you lose your mindful breathing, you will lose the present moment. It's not that mindful breathing is the only way to go back to the present moment, there are other ways, like mindful walking. Mindful walking can bring you back to the here and the now also. Mindful washing, mindful eating, there are many kinds of practice that can bring us back to the here and the now and touch life deeply, but mindful breathing can be practiced any time of the day. And if you are anchored in your mindful breathing, you don't risk losing the here and the now, namely losing life, because life is available only in the here and the now. So let us cultivate the art of mindful breathing in order for us to be able to settle in the here and the now, in our true home so that we will profit fully from the fact that we are alive and life is available with all its wonders.

When you practice mindful breathing you have a chance to go back to your body and recognize your body as your home. When you stand like this, "Breathing in, I am aware of

my body, my whole body; breathing out, I smile to my whole body." So standing like this you can practice. Or if you sit on a chair, you might like to practice, "Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body; breathing out, I smile to my body." It's very nice of you to recognize your body and smile to it. If you cannot do it, how can you do it for another person? Smile to yourself, smile to your body, recognize its presence, it's very kind of you to do so. In the four positions of your body, you recognize your body: standing, sitting, walking, lying down, the four basic positions of your body. When you stand you are aware that your body is in a standing position; when you walk you are aware of the walking position of your body, that's what we do in walking meditation; when we sit, we are aware that we are sitting; and when we lie down, we are aware of the lying down position of our body.

Body as a whole, body in the four positions, body in its various movements. When you bend down and pick up the marker, you are aware that you are bending down. When you stand upright, you are aware that you are standing upright. So not only are you aware of the position of your body but you are also aware of each movement of your body. In the beginning you do it slowly so that you can be aware of it easily. Suppose I hold this, and I slowly put it down. I become mindful all the way through. And now I have the intention to pick up that marker. I do it slowly so that I can be aware of each moment of the movement. Picking it up I am aware, bringing it closer to me I am aware, being aware of the movement.

When you walk, that is a movement. The mind is not thinking of anything else. Your mind is focused on the movement of walking. One hundred percent of your mind is put into the act of making a step. In the Vipassana tradition sometimes they do it like this: you are about to lift your right foot, and when you lift your right foot you are aware that you are lifting, so you use the word, "lifting". Then when you move, you say, "moving", and then you place it down, "placing". "Lifting, moving, placing; lifting, moving, placing; lifting, moving, placing". That is the idea. But if you are not careful, you become an automat, you do it automatically, and life will disappear. Do it in such a way that life is still there, do it in such a way that the act of meditation remains enjoyable. Because if you make life disappear you become a machine, and that is not meditation. You understand? Lifting, that's mindfulness, moving, that's mindfulness, placing, that's mindfulness. Yes, you can do that - but with the condition that life still remains with you and the act of meditation becomes a joyful, pleasant act because you are not practicing for the future, you are practicing in order to live your life much more deeply, cultivating solidity, freedom, and happiness in the here and the now. Remember the three characteristics of the Dharma: not a matter of time, dealing with the present moment, joyful, happiness. So you are free to adopt any kind of practice with the condition that you retain life, joy, and you continue to cultivate your solidity, your freedom, and your joy. "Lifting, moving, placing" is okay, is good with the condition that you don't become a machine, with the condition that the practice should bring you joy and happiness in the here and the now. Because you do not practice for the future, you practice for the present moment, and you assure a future because the future is made only with one element, the present. So taking good care of the present, you take care of the future. Don't worry about the future.

So when you walk from here to the kitchen in order to serve the food, don't say "I have to walk to the kitchen in order to get the food", don't say "I have to". Say, "I am enjoying walking to the kitchen", and each step is an end by itself. The steps are no longer means to arrive at an end. This is very important in Buddhist practice. There is no distinction between means and end. In the world they say, "I will do everything in order to reach that end." It's not like that in the Buddhist practice because everything you do is by itself an end. Everything you do should be in terms of the Dharma, it means everything you do should cultivate freedom, solidity, and happiness. So you know how to walk. No distinction between means and end. That is the practice of Buddhism. Remember: there is no way to

happiness, happiness is the way. There is no way to enlightenment, enlightenment is the way. Every time you make a step, you make an act of enlightenment. Because what is enlightenment, enlightenment is mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity of being aware of what is going on, and that is enlightenment. I am enlightened on the fact that I am making a step. Each step has its own value. Every act, every step that you make should be an act of enlightenment, a work of art. It should have beauty in it, it should have the good, the beautiful, and the true in it.

Remember, in the practice of Buddhism there is no distinction between means and end. When you wash your dishes, make every moment of the time of washing into a work of art, an act of enlightenment. Then you will see that it is wonderful, it's delightful to wash the dishes. That's the way the Buddha washes his bowl. When the Buddha washes his bowl, he is a true artist. He enjoys washing his bowl, he has perfect happiness in the act of washing his bowl. And you are his student and you learn to wash your bowl like the Buddha. You learn to walk like him, you learn to breathe like him, you learn to smile like him.

Enlightenment should be in the here and the now. Enlightenment is not a matter of the future and you can practice enlightenment with every moment of your daily life. Walking, sitting, eating, smiling. That is possible right away in the beginning of the practice. Going back to your breath, recognizing the positions of your body, recognizing every act performed by your body. We should learn how to be authentic, we don't practice for the sake of the form, we do not perform.

When we practice being aware of our body in its parts, that is what we do when we begin our total, deep relaxation. We lay down and first of all we go back to our breath: "Breathing in, I am aware of my in breath; breathing out, I am aware of my out breath". When your breathing is solid, when the quality of your breathing has improved, then become aware of your body as a whole, in the lying position, and just breathe in and out, and enjoy the presence of your body. Give your body a chance to be there without doing anything, total relaxation. That is the practice of love, directed to your body. "Oh my body, I know you are there." Be restful, be relaxed. Then you begin to practice being mindful of each part of your body. "Breathing in, I am aware of my eyes; breathing out, I smile to my eyes." You might do it during one in breath and out breath, or you might do it in ten in breaths and out breaths. You can stay with your eyes as long as you like. Just become aware of your eyes and smile lovingly to them. Your eyes are so wonderful, a wonderful pair of eyes in good condition. Then you switch to your ears: "Breathing out, I am aware of my ears; breathing in, I smile to my ears", and so on. You go from the top of your head to the soles of your feet, going through all the parts of your body. You practice scanning your body with a kind of beam, not laser, but mindfulness.

When you come down to your shoulders, you practice: "Breathing in, I am aware of my shoulders; breathing out, I smile to my shoulders," and you help your shoulders to relax and not to be stiff. When you come to your lungs, you practice mindfulness in order to embrace your lungs. "Breathing in, I know I am aware of my lungs; breathing out, I smile to my lungs." They work so hard, I don't give them enough clean air. "Breathing in, I am aware of my heart; breathing out, I smile to my heart." Now I have to stop drinking alcohol, because I really care for my heart. So you go through your body, you scan your body with the light of mindfulness, recognizing, embracing, smiling to it. That is the teaching of the Buddha, the recommendations made by the Buddha. He told us to take care of our bodies, to go back to them, to be kind to them, to recognize them as a whole and to recognize various parts of our bodies.

In the sutra on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha said, Suppose a farmer went up to the cellar and brings down a bag of seed. He opened one end of the bag and he took the other end of the bag and allowed all the kinds of seeds in the bag to flow on the floor. With eyes in good condition, the farmer recognized: that this is the seed of mung beans, this is the seed of kidney beans, this is the seed of corn, and he distinguished every kind of seed. So the meditator does the same thing. She recognizes her eyes as eyes and smiles to them, she recognizes her lungs as lungs and smiles to them. That is mindfulness of body in the body.

Then the Buddha suggests that we go back to our body and look at the body, becoming aware of elements that can be found in the body: namely the element earth, the element water, the element fire, and the element air. "Breathing in, I recognize the element of solidity in me," and the element of solidity is represented by earth. It may look solid in the beginning, but slowly we recognize that there is nothing so solid within it, like in the case of a nuclear physicist. "Breathing in, I recognize the element of earth in me; breathing out, I smile to that element in me." You begin to see more deeply into the nature of your body. "Breathing in, I recognize the element water in me; breathing out, I smile to the element water in me." I am made of water, at least 70%. It's very useful, it will bring us knowledge, vision, insight about the true nature of our body. "Breathing in, I am aware of the element fire in my body." Heat, 37 degrees. If that element increases, I will have fever, I will die. If that element is lower than 37 degrees, I will be sick too. So, "Breathing in, I am aware of the element heat in me; breathing out, I smile to the element heat in me." The art of the doctor is to keep the four elements in harmony. Health is the result of the harmony of the four elements. In the Asian tradition, a good doctor, a good physician is the one who can help you to retain the balance, the harmony of the four elements.

In the words of encouragement given by Master Quy Son he said "Although this body is supported by the four elements, these four elements very often oppose each other." Sometimes one is too strong, sometimes one is too weak, and therefore we've got trouble. "Even though this body is supported by the four elements, very often these four elements are not in balance." So the role of a doctor is to help keep these four elements in balance.

"I am aware of the element heat in me; I smile to the element heat in me." Even when you have a fever, try to smile to your fever, to the heat in your body and you will feel better. If you worry about it, the situation will get worse. "Breathing in, I am aware of the element air in me." The element air is so important, and the oxygen that we get into our body by the way of our lungs is so important. Our blood always goes back to our lungs; after having received some oxygen it becomes very bright, very red and it carries that oxygen to other cells in the body and releases this oxygen. So breathing in and out, we help our blood to renew itself, to get the oxygen it needs in order to share with all other cells in the body because life is a process of conditions, and we need oxygen for the processes to continue. So the element air is very important. "Breathing in, I am aware of the element air in me; breathing out, I smile to it."

The Buddha prepared very carefully the blooming of our enlightenment, and we can see in his teaching a lot of compassion and understanding. He understood human beings well and he told us how to take care of our bodies, how to look deeply into our bodies and get the kind of insight we need not be caught in our fear, our worries, and so on.

Once we recognize the four elements in our bodies, we also recognize the four elements outside of our bodies and we know that they are always together. Our life, our organism is an open system. Energy and matter goes through it every second in order to follow processes of changing, to continue. That is why we call our organism an open system.

It’s always changing. Matter, energy continue to go through it, life and death happen in every moment, and yet there is a continuation. A continuation happens at the same time with change. We learn about *alaya --alaya* is something changing all the time, but continuing all the time. Changing all the time but continuing all the time, whether we know it or not.

So there are things we might like to do, we might enjoy doing in the practice of the contemplation of the body in the body. In the sutra on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha used the terms, “contemplation of the body in the body, or as the body.” It means that when we go back to our body we don’t consider it only as an object of our perception, but we have to identify with it, we have to remove the frontier between subject and object of perception. That is why the expression, “contemplation of the body in the body” is very important, because in order to really understand something, you have to be with it. You have to be it, you have to remove the frontier between the inquirer and the object being inquired into. If you want to understand someone, put yourself into his skin, and then you can understand. If you continue to look at him as an object, you can never understand that person. This is very true. If you are a couple of friends, if you are father and son or mother and daughter, if you really want to understand each other, you have to become the other person. The only way to understand fully is to become the object of your understanding. This is very important in Buddhist practice. If you still maintain the distinction, the barrier between the object of understanding and the subject of understanding, then true understanding cannot happen.

There is a very nice story about it, the story of a grain of salt. The grain of salt would like to know how salty the water in the ocean is, the degree of salinity of the ocean. “I am a grain of salt, I am very salty. I wonder whether the water in the ocean is that salty.” Then a teacher comes and says, “Dear grain of salt, the only way for you to really know the degree of salinity of the ocean is to jump into it.” And when the grain of salt jumps into it, it becomes one with the sea water and its understanding is perfect.

So don’t expect to understand someone or something fully until you become one with it. In the French language there is a very nice word, the word “comprendre”. Comprendre means understand, it means to understand something is to pick it up and to become one with it. “Com” means to be one with it. As far as you are separated from it, don’t expect to understand it. That is why the Buddhist practice of meditation is to look at reality in such a way that the frontier will no longer be there. That kind of understanding is called the wisdom of non-discrimination. ‘nirvikalpajnana’ ‘vikalpa’ means distinction, discrimination; ‘nir’ means no. Non discrimination, wisdom. ‘jnana’ means wisdom. This practice goes very far, not only in terms of understanding, but of action. Suppose you give something to someone, you have to give it to him or to her in such a way that there will be no giver and no receiver. If you still think that you are a giver and that person is a receiver, then that is not the best way of giving, that is not dana paramita. As far as discrimination is still there, that is not perfect giving. You give because the other person is in need of it and the act is very natural. You don’t think of yourself as the one who gives and you don’t think of him or her as the person who receives the gift, and you don’t say, “He is not grateful at all.” If you are really practicing perfect giving, you don’t have these ideas. Whether that person is grateful or not grateful, you just give. That’s non discrimination. So this is not only true in the domain of perception but in the domain of action. The bodhisattva does everything for everyone but never takes credit for it.

So the first object of our mindfulness, of our meditation, is the body. And you know exactly what to do because the Buddha was very careful in offering the teaching. He told us how to go back to our breath, to make peace with our breath, to improve our quality of life with our breath and then embrace, recognize our body as a whole in the four positions, in various movements, in each part and in the elements that have made up the body. There is a

discourse specially spoken for the contemplation of the body in the body, called the Contemplation of the Body. In the Madhya Agama there is a sutra called 'The Sutra on the Contemplation of the Body'.

Today we have mentioned a very important teaching and practice. Practice in such a way that every act you make becomes an act of enlightenment, an act that can bring you solidity and peace and freedom right away. Whether you sweep the ground, whether you clean the bathroom, whether you cook the breakfast for the Sangha, try to enjoy every act you do and consider every act you do as an act of enlightenment. Be the perfect artist, be the real son, daughter, disciple of the Buddha. This is a very important teaching, a very important practice. Your life will change right away and peace, happiness, solidity, non-fear will be yours. You have to cultivate it every day. The true, the good, and the beautiful can be seen in every act of your daily life.

The means are the end

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on Dec 5, 1999 in Plum Village, France.

Today is the 5th December, 1999 and we are in the Upper Hamlet during our winter retreat. Last time we discussed about means and ends and we learned that in the practice of Buddhism there is no distinction between means and ends and means should be considered to be ends by themselves. This is a very strong practice and we should be able to rely on the Sangha in order to do it.

When you go to the Buddha Hall or to the Dharma Hall you know that you have something to do there: sitting meditation, or listening to a Dharma talk, or cleaning the hall but going there is also a practice. You are requested to sweep the meditation hall in mindfulness, you are supposed to sit beautifully when you listen to a Dharma talk, you are supposed to be concentrated, to be mindful during your sitting meditation so the practice takes place in the meditation hall, but we should know that the practice also takes place during your walking there.

That is why we should try to be practicing during the time we walk to the meditation hall and if you succeed in every step you take then the sitting meditation, or the Dharma talk or the cleaning of meditation hall will be a success.

Because we have the habit of wanting things to be done that is why we tend to neglect, to underestimate the value of the means.

At this time of autumn, I usually rake the leaves in the hermitage. I do this every three days or so and I use a rake. I know that raking the leaves is to have a clean path in order to walk, to do running meditation and so on; I run every day at least two times -I practice mindful running and I rake the leaves in that way(mindfully). Raking the leaves is not only to have only a clean path to run or to walk, but raking the leaves is just to enjoy raking the leaves. So I hold the rake in such a way that I can be happy and solid during the time of holding the rake. And every movement I do I want to make it into an act of enlightenment, an act of joy, an act of peace, so I am not in a hurry, because I see that the act of raking is as wonderful as having a clean path. I would not be satisfied with less than that. Every stroke I make should bring me joy and solidity and freedom. I should be entirely myself during the act of raking the leaves and raking the leaves is no longer a means to arrive at an end that is called having a clean path.

And you don't need to wait for a long time; if you can make one stroke like that, one movement like that, fully investing yourself into the act of raking the leaves then you will be rewarded right away. That is a perfect piece of art that you make because each movement is a work of art.

The same is true when you practice walking. Each step you make should be a perfect work of art, each step can bring you solidity, sovereignty because you do not walk like a slave, you walk like a free person. You walk like a Buddha because you have wanted to be a disciple, a daughter or a son of the Enlightened One, you want to be his continuation, that is why you are capable of making a step with sovereignty, you are fully in control of yourself. You are fully present in the here and the now and you enjoy that step. So walking meditation is not to arrive in the meditation hall. To arrive at the meditation hall is what you want, but you want more than that, because you arrive at the meditation hall several times a day and sometimes ten or twenty arrivals like that don't make any difference. So, one step is enough for you to arrive. I have arrived! With one step.

That is our practice but there is a habit energy that prevents you from doing so. You are used to running to believe that happiness is not possible here and now, happiness is possible only in the future. That kind of belief, that kind of habit energy has been there for a long time, transmitted by many generations of ancestors and coming to Plum Village is to have a chance to see it; that you are governed by your habit energy, by the tendency to run all the time. You